1: Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

"OBIA COMESI"

"Put them on. See the moon? You will catch fresh colds if you sit in the moonlight with your heads uncovered."

So with sun helmets on our heads we sat, and, as we listened to the new rhythms of the drums, there came a shriek from the river which brought us to our feet. Those who were not dancing ran up the hill away from the drums.

"Obia! Obia comes! It is the Kromanti!" were the cries, and our cook and our town man placed themselves in line across the front of our hut, watching uneasily.

"They will destroy all you have if they get inside," they called to us, "we must try to keep them out."

Up from the river, along the path he had trodden but a while before, came a man whom we could not recognize in the disguise given him by the paint on his face. Half his face was white, half a deep red, and we later learned what we did not then know, that this was the face marking of the Djadja Kromanti and that this man was possessed by one of the two Kromanti spirits which carry danger to those who are present when the seizure comes. He advanced toward the drums, machete in hand, as though he were stalking his prey, his legs raised high at every step, trailing some enemy. At his mouth the foam was gathering, and the words he uttered were in the Kromanti tongo, the sacred speech not understood by the uninitiated.

The songs changed in character, and the singers were men. The women who had not run away were dancing a quick accompaniment to the drum beats, adding their shrill voices to the singing and the intensity of the cries of the possessed man. When the possessed man reached the hut, he stopped in front of the drummers. As their rhythms poured out of the barrel-like drums, he answered stroke for stroke with shouted cries in his sacred secret language, raising his machete higher and higher, until, with a quick stroke, he slashed at two of the players who were seated side by side on a log. He missed them by what seemed a hair's breadth as his machete, whistling through the narrow space between their bodies, sank deep into the log on which they sat.

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796 796 781 787 Other cries now came to us, and from the bush a second possessed man burst into the clearing. He, too, had a machete, and he made straight for our hut. But obia did not prompt him to insist on entering, and he came close to us, gibbering in our faces, and then, stepping high as had the other, went his way to slash at our washbasins, sending one of them, that we treasure as a memory of that night's adventure, hurtling into the bush with a deep dent in its side.

From the river came renewed shouts, and some of the men dashed to the bank to jump into a canoe and paddle into the rapids, so that they might watch the possessed man who had leaped into the river to pit his strength against the fast water. On and on he swam upstream in the foaming water, as from the bank we watched his progress uneasily in the clear light of the moon. Finally obia left him, and the men in the boat seized his inert form and brought him back to shore.

796 787 When we returned to our hut, we found several others possessed. Obia had claimed six or seven, some with faces painted half white, half red, as was that of the first man, others with faces whitened, while still others had white faces with black markings. These last had Tigri, and the white was for Opete. Those who danced for the buzzard had no machetes, but went about in a circle, moving with bodies bent forward from their waists and with arms thrown back in imitation of the bird from which their spirit took its name.

One man with the Tigri face-painting took away the apinti from the drummer and placing it in the center of the clearing leaned over it and began drumming faster rhythms. Now indeed obia itself was drumming.

796 203 Long before this, we had observed the amenities of the occasion. As hosts, our duty was to provide the ceremonial rum with which the spirits needed to be regaled, and our cook, holding the bottle of rum for us, filled and refilled the small glass which we offered to men and women. Some did not drink at all but poured part of the rum on the

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(782) committed. This feast, at which pigs and poultry are sacrificed, must last for four weeks and thus ends with the following new moon. They pray, dancing and singing, while from time to time they kneel in order to ask for blessings.

[778] In the place where their idol stands they plant long sticks in the ground at certain intervals, on which they let flutter a number of long narrow strips of white cotton in the manner of flags.

[781] They celebrate this feast, for which no costs are spared, with all possible solemnity; it is attended by old and young and is very important among them.

Chapter IX

Conceptions about Death and Eternity

775 They believe that at death the existence of the human being ends, but that the spirit of the deceased does not disappear altogether and remains among them for a long time. Also they believe in unlucky spirits, which, as a result of an earlier evil life, must wander about restlessly, while the life on earth of the peaceful spirits is supposed to have been free of misdeeds.

They do not assume rewards in the hereafter for good deeds; /14/ misdeeds, however, in their opinion, are punished with restless wandering about.

[755] They say that those spirits know all that happens, and that they can come in contact with them at their feasts, that they receive many a hint and information, and through concealed signs come to know remedies against diseases, to which they attach the fullest confidence.

Chapter X

Marriage and Marital Life

584 Their marriages take place with few ceremonies. Frequently young men and even men ask pregnant women, in case they should bring a daughter into the world, to designate that girl as their wife,

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765 Thereupon follows a second, who just like the first has a calabash in hand, but this time filled with spirituous liquor, and from time to time sprinkles a few drops of it on the ground, in token of the fact that on this occasion, too, by means of drink, they think of the deceased with joy.

Then they again return to the dwelling, where all are gathered, and celebrate an enjoyable night with song and dancing until daybreak.

Chapter XII

Character, Virtues and Vices

157 [577] The Bush Negro, as I have already said above, has a great deal of respect for old age and for distinguished persons; with respect to their closest relations they are honest, which they can- [461] not pride themselves on otherwise. In their ordinary affairs they [609] are not lazy, but work tirelessly whenever it is necessary. With respect to strangers they are generous and obliging, all the more [152] when they can assume that they may claim reward. Jealousy, [784] envy, and malice are their greatest vices. Concerning many matters they have an antipathy that they call trefoe (treef). Thus, [781] for instance, one will eat something, the other not. Also they are very superstitious in small matters, to which they cling all the way down to distant generations; they call that obia (literally translated, bewitchment, magic).

262 [123] An Auca girl who through attachment to my wife and me has already lived with us in the town for fully five years, because [589] since the death of her husband, who was one of my most trusted workers, she did not want to attach herself to another, and who performed all kinds of housework for us, carries her trefoe of not eating any unscaled fish so far that she will not even cook her food on a fire where there is a pot in which an unscaled fish was previously prepared. I know another one who uses no milk and also does not eat meat of any kind (with the exception of bacon), unless it be game, and then it must be prepared by her, on the grounds that everything is prepared with butter and that butter comes from

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765 are divided up equally among all the inhabitants of the village. But if the dead person had near relatives in the village, children, nephews, or brothers, it is they who stand the main burden.
[613] Members of the dead person's lineage who are settled in other villages contribute equally to the expenses and the organizing of the festival, but in a symbolic fashion. /181/

[123] A council (kuutu) of the village inhabitants sets the date;
765 during the two weeks preceding each one is busy. The women
262 hull and winnow rice, prepare great quantities of couac and sugar-cane juice. The busimã scour the bush and have meat and fish smoked. Each one, according to his means, buys tafia, sugar, chocolate, and other articles of food liked by the Refugee Blacks.

765 The celebration of the rites occupies a whole week. This
795 is because, the Refugee Blacks think the influence of the dead person can be eliminated only progressively by the repetition of the rite of separation.

The first day, the yɔrka of the dead person whose mourning is going to be lifted is called by formulas beaten on the
[535] apinti drum. Then possession dances take place.
765 The second day is reserved for the material preparation for the ceremonies to follow.

[613] The third day, the spouse in mourning, if there is one, is conducted by the members of the dead person's lineage under
[822] the mortuary shed. He is dressed in red and is congratulated for having kept the mourning well. Then he is led to the river,
[983] and old women of the dead person's lineage begin to bathe him
[995] while adjuring the yɔrka to part company with him.

The fourth day at nightfall, all those present assemble at the mortuary shed. They recite tales (Anãsi tɔli),
[538] improvisations (mato), and riddles (ɔdo). This phase of the
[781] festival has as its object the concentrating of the attention of the hearers; it creates a warm, collective atmosphere which impregnates those present, bringing to them intense and highly colored emotions.

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Relations between Gods and Men

The kunu

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The kunu. The Refugee Blacks call kunu the collective curse which has weighed on a matrilineage since an ancient offense. The kunu is without time limit, without pardon, without pity, blind in the choice of its victims; in principle, it can end only with the complete extermination of the lineage. Each time [753] [761] that adversity swoops down on one of its members in the form of death, sickness, various calamities, the kunu is the most frequently obtained explanation. The instrument of this inexpiable vengeance is either a god or the yɔkka (spirit) of a dead person.

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This notion, which occupies a central position in the beliefs of the Refugee Blacks, does not appear to have been borrowed directly. Most of the populations of Dahomey /222/ and the Ivory Coast take for granted the idea of arbitrary punishments exercised upon the members of the lineage by the gods or the ancestors of the group. But no population of these regions has, to our knowledge, developed so highly systematized a doctrine.

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The conceptions developed by the Refugee Blacks, divinities impelled exclusively by vengeance, and especially ancestors inexorably chastising lineages other than their own, have created new relationships among individuals and among lineages.

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We have not been able to elucidate the origin of the word kunu. Perhaps it is a deformation of the Mina word ekunu, which means burial.

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Three categories of divinities can pursue men with their kunu, and because of this fact the Refugee Blacks feel toward them an extreme terror mixed with veneration.

/238 cont./ The struggle against
754 781 wisi is one of the foundations of their social life, protection against the undertakings of the wisimã one of the most constant worries of each person. Nobody knows these wisimã with certainty; one is reduced to vague suspicions of this or that person, which one dares not formulate for lack of proof. No one knows exactly how they operate. Yet each one feels their enterprises everywhere about him, and those who by reason of their wealth or successes with women have the most reason to believe themselves exposed to jealousy live in anxiety.

754 [828] [784] Intense jealousy or hate are already a form of wisi, and this is why each one must try to drive them out of his heart; besides, he would risk falling ill or being subject to all sorts of calamities for having broken his oath. But the wisimã employs explicit procedures:

--Burying a bottle (beli bata) containing sorcery under his enemy's door. When the latter comes home, the sorcery will [751] penetrate into him. So some Refugee Blacks carry a special ɔbia against this kind of aggression: thanks to this ɔbia, they will feel a sharp pain in the tip of the foot when approaching the bottle, which they will thus uncover easily.

754 794 --Kisi akkaa, stealing the akka of the enemy. The latter then becomes mad. The Boni believe that the wisimã operates at night, taking advantage of the fact that the enemy's akka has left his body to wander. He captures it by attracting it with what it likes. For that, one must know the name of his enemy's akka, know its tastes and preferences; all things which each Refugee Black will carefully hide, even from his comrades. What the wisimã does with the akka was not clear to any of our informants. He tries either to capture it in order to deprive his enemy of it, or to make it hostile to its bearer, or to inspire it with abnormal ideas or tastes. If someone manifests an abnormal change /239/ in tastes or behavior, people will be inclined to think that a wisimã was able to act upon his akka.

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824 M78 789 the tree: "Ala sani di dɛ na a udu ya, da mu kumɔto, beka mi ɔ faa ɛŋ. Kɔm na a pina tɔ̃ŋgo: All things (suprahuman entities) who are in this tree, leave it, for I am going to throw it to the ground; come into this palm leaf." One takes away the palm leaf and the little flags far from there into the interior of the lands, to a spot where nobody is likely to come to fell trees, and one arranges them beside some big tree. The divinities will come and settle there. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to wait almost a month to cut the katu tree, probably to leave the maleficent influences time to dissipate.

824 M78 [789] [1171] The Boni are so afraid of this tree that many of them, deeming these precautions insufficient, give up the idea of cutting it down and go to establish their clearings elsewhere. The Creole gold miners of the Haut Maroni, who call it cottonwood, also attribute a maleficent influence to it and some of them do not cut it.

The Refugee Blacks fear also, but to a lesser degree, what they call kɔtkɔti, that is, the small trees of any species which, instead of having grown straight, have two angles in their trunk like a Z. This is a very rare anomaly. In such a shrub is hidden a maleficent entity, taku sani, capable, if a man cut the trunk unintentionally, to take revenge on him by paralyzing a limb or even the whole body in a bent position. In order to see whether or not the entity is present in the shrub, *there exists, according to the Boni, a very simple means:* one gently brings the finger near the bent part. If he feels his finger held there to the point where he has trouble drawing it back, the genie is present! The power of autosuggestion characteristic of the Refugee Blacks shows itself clearly here.

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[1789] Rites exist for rendering the kɔtkɔti harmless, for cutting them with impunity, and even for using them in magic preparations, but we do not know the details. Kɔtkɔti are among the objects usually found in the chapels (ɔbia ɔsu) of Kumɛ̃nti; we have even happened to see one used to fasten a